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Negotiating energy democracy in practice: governance processes in community energy projects

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing ‘energy democracy’ (ED) movement which regards the transition to renewable energy as an opportunity for socio-economic transformation, as well as technological innovation. The literature on ED tends to associate greater democratic control of energy systems with increased community control over the means of energy generation and distribution. Nonetheless, this literature often *assumes* rather than *demonstrates* that the forms of governance it promotes are more democratic than the status quo. This analysis contributes to the emerging field of ED by assessing the complex and varied ways in which communities in Scotland practise energy governance. By focusing on three key governance processes (decision-making, accountability and dispute resolution), the importance of local contexts for the establishment and negotiation of democratic practices is demonstrated. This local specificity, however, also raises further questions regarding the universal applicability of the ED concept.

KEYWORDS Energy democracy; community governance; inclusivity; energy governance; Scotland

Introduction

There are growing signs that a global energy transition is underway, with renewable sources gradually replacing fossil fuels. In 2014, renewable energy accounted for 19% of global final energy consumption and this percentage continues to grow (REN21 2016). Previous energy transitions (waterpower to coal, and coal to oil) show that broad social and geographical change underpins major changes to energy systems. These potential transformational impacts of the current energy transition have, however, thus far received relatively little attention (Bridge *et al.* 2013, Sovacool 2014). This is, however, beginning to change. More recently, researchers and practitioners have begun to emphasise the role of social, economic and political power in energy transitions, most explicitly expressed through concepts of energy justice and energy democracy (ED) (Weis *et al.* 2015).

The notion of ‘energy democracy’ has become a focal point for civil society groups involved in disparate struggles around energy issues (Angel

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2016). While there is no set definition, civil society organisations use the term ‘energy democracy’ to link decarbonisation with changes to who controls the means of energy production and distribution (Strachan *et al.* 2015). These organisations see the decentralised nature of renewable energy technologies as an opportunity for ‘genuine popular control over energy choices’ (McHarg 2016, p.313). For many in this civic movement, this ‘genuine popular control’ takes the form of greater community control of resources (e.g. Anthony 2012, Cumbers *et al.* 2013, Vansintjan 2015). They consider community and cooperative energy groups as the ‘ideal organisational entities’ (Carrilho Da Graça and Gomes 2016, p.3) in which ‘individuals participate actively in decision-making’ (REN21 2016, p.135). As such, advocates for greater ED see community action as an opportunity to tackle energy issues in ways that meet communities’ needs and enrich them (Anthony 2012, Weinrub and Giancatarino 2015). Thus, proponents of community ownership envisage it as a ‘third way’, an alternative to both

.... public ownership, with its highly attenuated (representative) democratic control over arm’s-length and centralised public corporations, and privatisation, with its illusory promise of individual empowerment through shareholder democracy and consumer sovereignty. (McHarg 2016, p.16)

There is a tendency, however, to assume rather than demonstrate that community projects are more democratic or just (McHarg 2016). In other words, there is a risk that advocates fall into what Purcell (2006) has labelled the ‘local trap’, with generalisations made about the quality of projects based on their scale. Additionally, it risks perpetuating the notion that community organisations are willing and able to provide the democratic functions expected of them (Little 2002).

Recently, calls for ED through greater community control have begun to transcend social movements, gaining the attention of policy-makers (e.g. David 2016, Party 2016) and researchers (e.g. Mcharg 2016, Angel 2017). A more critical analysis of the assumptions underpinning the calls for greater ED is therefore very timely. This research does this by demonstrating how community energy (CE) groups establish and negotiate democratic processes. It focuses on three key processes deemed critical to democratic energy governance but for which limited empirical evidence is currently available: decision-making (John 2014, Kunze and Becker 2014), accountability (Chavez 2015, Weinrub and Giancatarino 2015) and dispute resolution (McHarg 2016). I have chosen the community-level focus because the apparent democratic nature of CE groups needs to be better understood before their potential to contribute to the democratisation of the energy system can be considered. This research highlights that CE projects can contribute to greater democratic governance of energy resources but that they also experience barriers and tensions that need overcoming when seeking to achieve greater ED.

ED – an opportunity for more just outcomes?

The emerging body of literature on ED frames discussions around energy resources explicitly as social struggles (Weis *et al.* 2015). Invoking participatory notions of democracy (Somerville 2005), advocates present community-level governance of energy resources as an opportunity not just to produce clean energy or deliver social benefits (e.g. Walker *et al.* 2007, Warren and Malcolm 2010, Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012, Walton 2012, The Scottish Government 2015b), but to fundamentally reshape the social, economic and political relations embedded in these Megawatts. Schlosberg (2013) refers to such notions of participatory, sustainable resource governance as sustainable materialism: addressing environmental conditions as the basis for social justice. The sustainable materialist view seeks not just to resist, but to reconstruct practices of production and consumption, and to (sustainably) rebuild the material relationships we have with resources we use (Schlosberg 2013). The ED movement echoes these sentiments:

[The] vision of a democratized energy future includes an informed and conscious community that understands the **right** relationship of people to natural resources and the need to live in ecological balance. (Weinrub and Giancattarino 2015, p.4 – emphasis added by the author)

Thus, it shifts the focus away from individualist responses to climate and environmental issues to a collective focus on the rethinking and redesigning of processes and institutions connected to meeting basic needs (Schlosberg 2013).

Advocates often consider direct involvement of communities and other civil society groups in energy governance, a key part of this process. Proponents argue that through greater community participation and control, participation in decisions around energy is more inclusive (Kunze and Becker 2014), ensuring decisions are more representative (Vansintjan 2015), and with greater opportunity to hold decision-makers to account (John 2015, Weinrub and Giancattarino 2015). In other words, it sees local, collective action as an opportunity for cooperation through which shared values can emerge (Tam 1988). The emergence of such shared values is in turn deemed to contribute to a ‘more sustainable relationship between just communities and a working environment’ (Schlosberg 2013, p.49, also Weinrub and Giancattarino 2015).

Democratisation through decentralisation?

By framing discussions around energy as social struggles with the aim to disrupt the relations embedded in current energy systems, the ED movement presents itself as deeply political. Nonetheless, the view with which it is

associated – of community-level governance as morally virtuous – appears more closely aligned with orthodox communitarians' views of communities as having a natural, dominant moral voice which ensures they do the 'right' thing (Little 2002, Taylor Aiken 2015). Scholars, however, have criticised this notion of these 'mythic communities' (Agrawal and Gibson 1999, p.638) of homogenous populations where locally evolved norms and collaborative processes help to manage resources (more) sustainably and equitably (also, Dalby and Mackenzie 1997, Featherstone *et al.* 2012, Taylor Aiken 2014). As Taylor Aiken (2015) also observes, 'community' has come to imply both a normative good and a direct correlation of 'green'. This is also evident among ED advocates who, while seeing them as part of larger political struggles, frame communities themselves as apolitical.

However, key political theorists (such as McConnell 1966, Young 1990, Edwards 2009) have criticised the assumption that community action creates desirable outcomes. Recent empirical work that has considered the role of communities in energy and sustainability governance also questions this (e.g. Walker *et al.* 2007, 2010, Creamer 2015, Taylor Aiken 2015, Simcock 2016). Those who have cautioned against the presumption that decentralised, community action equals democratic or just processes and outcomes have often done so for two key reasons: difference and inequality. I consider these in more detail below.

Scholars have often deemed shared interests essential in the successful development of CE projects (Haggett and Quiroz-Aitken 2015, Islar and Busch 2016). In their pursuit of common interests, communities can, however, (inadvertently) create an atmosphere of conformity and homogeneity that stifles dissent (Young 1990, Little 2002). Others have therefore advocated for an 'agonistic pluralism' that legitimises dissent and debate in (community) governance, arguing that the democratic qualities of civil society are rooted in social mobilisation and contestation as well as in cooperation and civiness (Mouffe 2000, Anderson *et al.* 2016, Islar and Busch 2016). For these authors, difference or dissent is not simply to be ignored, overcome or stifled through consensus (Anderson *et al.* 2016), but to be recognised, validated and, from there, possibly negotiated.

Islar and Busch (2016) have suggested that negotiating differences in CE governance requires an open and inclusive process. Others have warned, however, that we should not assume that decentralised governance will be more inclusive or equal. Rather, community groups can be 'arenas for personal ambition and power as well as sacrifice and service' (Edwards 2009, p.44). For those sceptical of the links between forms and norms of governance, community governance simply signifies a change in scale, with the *local* distribution of power determining the outcomes of material and symbolic contests among actors (Lane and Corbett 2005). When seeking to develop an inclusive community project, it is therefore important to

consider the patchwork of concerns and interests that exist within a place, and the power relations between them (McMorran *et al.* 2014, Creamer 2015, Grossmann and Creamer 2017). This is pertinent to CE groups, who might manage and distribute substantial sums of money (Walker *et al.* 2010, Bristow *et al.* 2012). While thus framed as an opportunity for disadvantaged communities (Weinrub and Giancatarino 2015), findings from research on CE and environmental projects show that participation is often limited to those in higher socio-economic groups (Angel 2016, Grossmann and Creamer 2017). Kearns (1995) has described this as the conundrum of democratic governance: the more participatory democracy becomes, the more it risks exacerbating existing inequalities.

To ensure that existing differences and power relations are not simply reproduced, it is therefore important to consider community governance institutions and practices (Kearns 1995, Simcock 2016). This research seeks to analyse three related practices of democratic governance to understand how these intersect with difference and inequality in community-led projects. The understanding that ideology or institutional features (structures, rules and laws) affect but do not necessarily determine or guarantee good practice has informed my focus on democratic *practices* (Fox 1992, Edwards 2009). A greater consideration of governance practices enables an understanding of how different individuals and groups negotiate relationships, and how contradictions and tensions emerge and are possibly overcome (Young 1990, DeFilippis *et al.* 2006, Edwards 2009).

CE in Scotland

The empirical setting for this research is Scotland, where ED is becoming an increasingly important issue. The Scottish Government has set targets to generate 100% of electricity demand from renewable sources by 2020 (The Scottish Government 2011b). Through the introduction of various support mechanisms since 2002 (The Scottish Government 2006, 2013), CE in Scotland is overrepresented compared to other parts of the United Kingdom (Bomberg and McEwen 2012). Furthermore, in 2016, the Director of Energy and Climate Change at the Scottish Government announced that the future for renewable energy in Scotland is 'localised, democratised and mutualised' (Stark 2016). This is the first time it has incorporated the notion of ED in official government discourse. Again, this stands in contrast to the UK level, where the idea has not (yet) gained traction in official government discourse. While there is a well-established ED movement in Germany (see Kunze and Becker 2014, Weis *et al.* 2015, Angel 2017), evidence regarding the forms, practices and outcomes of ED outside the German context is currently limited. The focus on ED in Scotland – not a pioneer such as Germany, but one where the concept of

ED *has* transcended social movements to become recognised by government officials – therefore offers the opportunity to enrich the evidence base and evaluate how the notion of ED is translated into new national contexts.

CE in Scotland is also part of a broader trend of decentralisation and community-led development in Scotland (The Scottish Government 2011a, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, van Veelen 2017). According to one civil servant, the growing role for, primarily place based, communities has been based on the belief that such communities need to balance competing demands, and their resource management practices therefore inherently benefit the general good of the people in that area (private correspondence, 2015). Again, these (presumed) links between community-level action and improved outcomes warrant further investigation.

Finally, Scotland makes an interesting case study due to the diverse forms of CE in Scotland (van Veelen 2017; Table 1). This diversity of approaches and associated legal and organisational models stands in contrast with the universalist claims made for community governance – as shown above. Using Scotland as a case study therefore enables an analysis in greater detail of this issue of local particularity versus universal democratic claims.

Methods

Research reported here is part of a larger project that examined the governance of CE in Scotland. To capture the diversity of the sector, my research adopts a broad approach, engaging with 15 community groups across Scotland (Table 1). I selected groups to represent the five different types of CE groups in Scotland identified by van Veelen (2017). In total, I conducted 39 in-depth interviews between 2013 and 2016.

In most groups (CG4–15), I interviewed one or two employees or voluntary board members, but I conducted more extensive case study research with CG1–3. In these three cases, I interviewed a greater number of community group members, as well as local residents not actively involved in the projects. I conducted 31 interviews face-to-face, and eight by phone. Interviews varied in length between 30 and 150 min. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and analysed them through thematic coding in NVIVO. Documentary analysis of planning applications, news reports and community groups' websites supplements the interview data. Due to the sensitive nature of some responses, I have removed all identifying features.

I chose the mixed approach of breadth and depth for two reasons. The choice for breadth was important because this research explores the varied experiences of democratic governance across different types of CE. In doing so, it complements previous research (e.g. Simcock 2016) which has provided a rich and detailed account of decision-making processes in a single

Table 1. Overview of the community groups included in this research.

Community group	Year founded	Technology	Scale ^a	Type (based on van Veelen 2017)
CG1	2005	Biomass (completed); hydro (under consideration)	Medium	Community developers
CG2	2010	Hydro (joint venture); wind	Medium	Community developers
CG3	2006	Wind	Medium	Cooperatives
CG4	2010	Solar	Under consideration	Transition towns
CG5	2009	Wind	Small	Small is beautiful
CG6	2002	Wind (joint venture); biomass, hydro	Medium	Community developers
CG7	2004	Wind	Large	Community developers
CG8	2013	Solar	Under consideration	Small is beautiful
CG9	2013	Hydro	Small	Community developers
CG10	2008	Hydro (completed); smart grid (under consideration)	Small	Innovators
CG11	2013	Wind	Medium	Cooperatives
CG12	2005	Wind	Large	Community developers
CG13	1999	Wind	Medium	Community developers
CG14	2000	Wind; smart grid (under consideration)	Small	Innovators
CG15	2008	Hydro; wind	Medium	Community developers

^aScale refers to the size of the technology that is community-owned. To help ensure the anonymity of these groups, the following categories for installation size have been used: micro <15 kW, small 16–100 kW, medium 101–1000 kW, large >1000 kW.

case study. The larger number of cases enables this research to highlight the breadth of experiences and identify common features and challenges. This research also recognises, however, that governance is a complex process and that interviews with community leaders alone only paint a partial picture. Therefore, I selected for further research three groups with a greater variety of stakeholders.

Results

The community groups included in this study, despite their different focuses, generally have similar organisational arrangements in place. Approximately half the groups in this study rely solely on volunteers. In those cases, the voluntary governing body (such as a board of directors) are responsible for both strategic governance and day-to-day decision-making. The other half have at least one paid staff member responsible for day-to-day decision-making, with the governing body responsible for strategic governance. In both cases, the wider membership of the organisation forms another pillar of governance, to which the

governing body is accountable. Participation in organisations' governance by their wider membership generally takes three forms: participation in an Annual General Meeting (AGM, during which members of the governing body are elected), community ballots on key decisions and informal engagement. A governing document defines the relationship between members and the governing body. Despite commonalities in organisational structures, I identified significant differences in governance practices. The following three sections will explore in more detail how communities shape democratic governance, and the relation between the different pillars of governance. It will do so by focusing on three governance aspects: decision-making practices, accountability procedures and dispute resolution.

Inclusivity in decision-making: 'local leaders' versus broad engagement

Scholars have attributed the potential of community-owned energy projects to contribute to greater ED primarily to their potential for influencing decision-making, where ideally 'the greatest number of people directly affected by a project should hold as large a power of [...] decision-making as possible' (Kunze and Becker 2014, p.9). However, as this analysis shows, active participation is often limited, raising questions about leaders' representativeness of the wider community.

Many of the community groups included in this study aspire to broad-based participation and engagement in decision-making. However, for practical reasons, most groups mix representative forms of governance with participatory ones. These groups have two key moments when the wider membership can have their say on proposed developments: during a community consultation and a ballot. Although an important part of the development process, community groups often set up these engagement opportunities to gauge or gain support for a project, rather than influence its details:

The community were consulted at length regarding the permissions to develop. They weren't consulted regarding the structure of the finance [...], which does come back and hit us. (CG9, employee)

Some interviewees felt that this set up worked best for everyone and that community members seem to have no desire to be consulted more often. Instead, members are often content to leave staff and directors of the community organisation 'to just get on with it' (CG2, general member). Groups' reports of low attendance figures at their AGMs and their difficulty in attracting new Directors appear to confirm this assertion that many members have no desire for greater involvement.

Reliance on a small number of people can be a double-edged sword. Both interview respondents and the literature (Van Der Schoor and

Scholtens 2015, Martiskainen 2017) often attribute the successful development of a project to having 'local leaders' (CG3, board member) involved in projects' governing bodies. Interviewees indicated that having confident and competent community leaders was essential not only to successfully manage complex CE projects but also for convincing the wider community of the feasibility and importance of the project.

Nonetheless, interview responses indicated that there might be (hidden) barriers to participation, which reinforce existing community relations and hierarchies. Especially in rural areas, it is an often-heard complaint that it is 'always the same people', or '*the usual suspects*' who are involved in community governing bodies (CG1, employee; CG2, board member; see also Creamer 2015, Simcock 2016). The frequent involvement of a small number of people in community projects can also raise concerns regarding these leaders' representativeness of the wider community, not least because community leaders often were similar in age, gender and/or socio-economic background. While some interviewees deemed the continued reliance on a small group of local leaders a necessity or an inevitability, others were more critical. These critics argued that a lack of diversity not only affects governing bodies' ability to represent the diverse interests of the wider community but that this could also be detrimental to the quality of decisions made:

The minute we [the first female Board members] went in there we started bringing up different issues. You could see on the faces of the other board members that they were like 'oh, we never thought of that'. Literally things that were just rubber stamped [...] This is what we talk about, when we talk about diversity. That people are willing to challenge things without first subscribing to the, what's the word, groupthink. (CG3, board member)

Some CE groups recognised that their approach of 'passive inclusivity' (Grossmann and Creamer 2017) did not necessarily break down participation barriers. In response, these groups have become more proactive in their recruitment to encourage a more representative governing body:

[The] board was of an age, and of a particular gender. That was recognised, and we needed to do more. We just had an open evening, a bit of a social evening, it was an open invitation to anybody, but we also specifically targeted folk to come by and try and break down the barriers of maybe some of the assumptions of what it was like to be a director of a charity. (CG13, employee)

This proactive approach takes various forms, depending on local circumstances and priorities. Some groups have set quotas, for example to ensure that the directors reflect either the age or geographical distribution of the wider community. Others have tried to improve their diversity through more informal means, for example by proactively asking women or young members to join the board. It is, however, interesting to note that many

groups who have started to take active measures to improve the diversity of their boards have only begun to do so after their energy projects were built. As one board member said, her fellow board members care about issues of diversity and representation in principle, but in practice, they often deem them of secondary importance:

[The issue of representation and diversity] does come up, but ... it's considered as an add-on. [...] they don't really look at the leadership and themselves, in my opinion, enough. People don't really want to challenge themselves, do they? And they're quite comfortable in what they're doing. That's a very natural position probably, but it's not. ... It's not, diverse, is it? It's not representative. It's not very proactive in changing anything for the better. (CG3, board member)

Furthermore, groups that have begun to address the issue of access to decision-making procedures (labelled 'external exclusion' by Young 2000) may find that internal forms of exclusion continue to persist. These may include an unwillingness to speak in meetings due to (perceived) power differentials or not having one's opinion considered. One interviewee gave the example of their participation in another cooperative where a female board member had tried to challenge the other, male, committee members:

At that time the group board was quite traditionalist. They had somebody there who was a senior person, who was a very good businessman, it was quite difficult challenging all of that. And she challenged it in a very simplistic way and she was just ... with humour actually. And that wasn't thought well of. (CG3, board member)

Nonetheless, this interviewee felt that a continuing focus on inclusivity and diversity may slowly erode internal forms of exclusion.

To summarise, groups often desire inclusive participation and open exchange. Although some are taking active steps to achieve this, others see it as something of secondary importance. Second, as the latter part of this section shows, even when attempts that include a greater diversity of members in the governing body occur, this does not guarantee that barriers to inclusive participation have been overcome. Internal forms of exclusion may persist.

Accountability of decision-makers

The previous section showed that a small group of people made most of the decisions in these CE groups. It is therefore important to consider how these decision-makers are held to account. To ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the community and the influence of individuals is kept in check, the groups in this study have adopted procedures to ensure

accountability both towards community members and outside bodies such as funders. My focus here is specifically on internal responsibility towards members, rather than outside agencies.

Interviews showed that groups pay varying degrees of attention to accountability and oversight procedures. While most have received advice about legal forms and decision-making and accountability procedures, this may have been many years ago. Groups' circumstances and activities often change over time, with the result that to a greater or lesser extent, communities 'figure out' governance and accountability procedures 'as we go along' (community group [CG] 13, employee; CG9, board member). This, however, has the effect that even if official accountability procedures are in place, they are not always followed. Interviewees gave three explanations for this: a lack of active members with sufficient time and knowledge, pressure to meet tight deadlines and the increasing complexity of projects and organisational structures.

As the previous section noted, a small number of volunteers run many CE groups. These volunteers – especially in the small rural communities where many projects are based – are often also involved in other community affairs. One example included in this study concerns an island with approximately 60 adult residents. Around 20 of these are actively involved in local community groups, of which there are five. Many active residents are therefore involved in multiple activities and governing bodies, in addition to their day job. Similar situations were observed in other rural communities. One staff member of a CE group noted that despite board members' best intentions, it is not always possible for them to invest the time needed to oversee the development of lengthy and increasingly complex energy projects:

Part of it is lack of understanding that it is their role [to set the guidelines], but a lot of it is lack of capacity to do it, because they're actually the core of the economy here, and they can't run their own businesses and run as volunteers a very demanding business that is doing ambitious and innovative things as well. (CG10, employee)

This lack of time and possibly understanding can, inadvertently, risk undermining a group's efforts to successfully establish energy projects. In two cases included in this study, individuals felt compelled to make key decisions with little oversight. As they deemed their projects' completion to be at risk, they took decisions without their group boards' knowledge or approval:

[The Board's] conclusion was, that this is too risky. [...] I just ignored the board's decision and carried on working on it, getting an agreement in place that protected shares, that protected investors. A month later I said to the board: 'I'm going to explain to you why you can't stick to the decision you

made last time'. So, we had another meeting and they were kind of 'alright, okay, we've been fools'. We were then going again, but in that month, I had been completely ignoring what my board had said, and carrying on regardless. (CG10, employee)

To tell you quite bluntly ... I have lied to people [...] in order to take a calculated risk. Because, if I'd said to people, we may have to pay all this money back, they wouldn't have gone ahead with the project. (CG9, board member)

In both these cases, the individuals involved attributed their decision not only to what they saw as a lack of understanding on the Board Members' behalf, but especially to the time pressure they, as project leaders, were under to complete their projects. Some felt that they had no choice but to make decisions without gaining their board's approval first, to meet external deadlines:

When you work on such tight timelines and people are volunteering, it needs one person to try and hold everything together. [...] There is a very clear route to get this done. And ... if anyone questions that, messes anything up, that could destabilise the whole thing. (CG9, board member)

Respondents identified the increasing complexity of projects, and organisational structures, as a third reason for a possible lack of accountability. Particularly, organisations that have taken on additional responsibilities or established multiple energy projects often find their governance structure to be increasingly complex, involving one or more subsidiary organisations. This growth in institutional complexity brings with it new challenges, especially for those with a small local population to draw volunteers from. Groups require knowledgeable volunteers with sufficient free time available, while also broadening participation and limiting conflicts of interest, which can be a major issue in small communities (CG16, employee).

Interviewees indicated that this increasing institutional complexity is not always immediately accompanied by the implementation of new accountability procedures. While advice from external organisations is available, groups often learn about good governance as they go along. It can be a steep learning curve, sometimes risking a project or group's survival altogether. In one case, the increasingly blurred boundary between the voluntary community group and its trading subsidiary (which owned the energy development)

...caused a lot of issues with regards to governance, because it was almost like the tail wagging the dog. Trying to employ people within the Trading Subsidiary to run the Trust. It became problematic. In fact, it was on the brink of failure. (CG13, employee)

Although there are support organisations who offer ‘governance health checks’, interviewees indicated that this does not change the nature of the problem: that they are reliant on a small number of volunteers to develop a growing number of increasingly complex projects, often under significant time pressure.

This section, and the previous one, showed that it can be difficult for community groups to negotiate tensions around how to be inclusive and representative of the wider community while meeting ‘very, very, very tight deadlines’ (CG9, board member), primarily resulting from changes to funding mechanisms, affecting how much communities will earn from their projects. As a small number of individuals make many decisions around the details of CE projects, it is important that the membership can hold them to account. Interview data show, however, that individuals driving a project forward do not always follow accountability procedures because of a lack of sufficient time and knowledge, a pressure to meet tight deadlines and the increasing complexity of projects and organisational structures. A (perceived) lack of representativeness and accountability from local leaders are challenges in themselves but can also be a source of disagreement in communities or impede the satisfactory resolution of disputes. The final section will consider this in more detail.

The challenges of dealing with disagreement

Interviewees agreed that differences of opinion are a normal part of community life. They therefore did not think that the presence of disagreements was a cause for concern but did indicate that ‘[t]he strength of a community depends on how you solve those disagreements’ (CG2, board member).

These interviews show, however, that some CE groups struggle to deal with disagreement. One factor that respondents highlighted is the blurred personal/professional boundary that employees or volunteers in these projects can experience. Respondents often attribute the strength of community-level action to the close connection between those actively developing the project and the wider community. However, some of the staff and volunteers interviewed, especially those in small rural communities, reported that ‘being embedded’ in the community can also make it difficult to separate their professional from their personal lives. The ability of residents to interact informally with local leaders can be positive aspect of CE, but it also means that disagreements and differences of opinion are not only expressed in formal settings, such as groups’ meetings, but also in informal local spaces. For some, the only way to deal with this is to retreat from community life:

I tend to work from home and isolate myself so I don't have to deal with some of the negativity. It can make me feel miserable. (CG10, employee)

This reluctance to confront, often ongoing, criticism is very understandable. However, as the experience of CG2 shows, this could have unintended consequences and contribute to a downward spiral in community relations. This group reported similar difficulties, with some local residents opposing a proposed CE project. Opponents' objections were not only concerned with the proposed wind turbine but also with the anticipated income from the project, and who would decide what it would be spent on. One local objector admitted that his disagreement with the group over the turbine had 'nothing to do with energy, but everything to do with community' (CG2). While arguments against CE projects are often made on technological or environmental grounds, this can mask the social and power struggles behind such disputes. In this case, community leaders viewed this detractor's arguments as simply the latest chapter in the historically antagonistic relationship with the group's leaders. Nonetheless, some people in the community viewed community leaders' reluctance to engage with this, and other, detractors' arguments as an attempt to silence alternative voices.

While many groups reported experiencing some vocal opposition within the community, this often fades over time. In the case of CG2, however, a court case was necessary to resolve the dispute around their community wind turbine. Although the Court ultimately permitted the project to go ahead, it did question the group's handling of discontent. In particular as prior to the case the community group had written to local objectors, stating that they (the objectors) would be held liable for all legal expenses were the community group to win. The Court questioned why the group had sought to 'stifle the expression of objections' (anonymised Court quote).

This example shows the importance of arbitration in cases of community disputes. As a staff member of another community group noted: 'There is often the assumption that a community are working as one, but this is not the case (CG10, employee)'. Differences and disagreements are part of community projects as much as any other (energy) projects but can be difficult to handle. The blurred personal/professional boundary that many community leaders experience can partly explain this and is further exacerbated by the pressures described in the previous sections. Due to the pressure to deliver timely outcomes, respondents often saw engaging detractors as a distracting and time-consuming process that can sap the energy from staff and volunteers.

Nonetheless, as the Court decision above indicates, allowing objections to be vented may help to combat a lingering sense of grievance towards a group and its activities. Additionally, in this case, these objections not only delayed the project's development but also resulted in a significant legal bill.

Considering the time and financial pressures groups are under, this is something many can ill-afford, and which early intervention may prevent.

Concluding discussion

I have sought to challenge the ‘romanticised narrative’ that CE groups can always be considered ‘democratic’ (Simcock 2016, p.475; see also Walker *et al.* 2010, McHarg 2016) while also being empathetic towards the challenges communities face. Supporting earlier research (Johnson 2004, Simcock 2014), this research shows that while respondents deem inclusivity to be important, the ideals of inclusive decision-making and robust accountability procedures can be at odds with the practicalities of meeting them. It also shows that the nominal inclusion of (previously) underrepresented groups in decision-making does not automatically guarantee a transfer of power, as internal forms of exclusion may remain (Young 2000). Finally, perhaps somewhat in contrast to Islar and Busch (2016), the findings on dispute-handling show that while many communities seek to govern based on cooperation and consensus-building, agonistic processes of contestation and negotiation are also part of the day-to-day reality of democratic governance. Combined, these findings demonstrate the varied ways in which communities establish democratic rules, and the different ways in which these rules are followed, negotiated and at times subverted. Although ED advocates often present community as apolitical, this may indicate that the community sphere is in fact politicised through community-level action, as these groups are required to engage in decisions around key issues of democratic governance – such as representation, participation and accountability – which are equally relevant to governance processes beyond the community scale.

This research builds on earlier, in-depth, case study research (e.g. Simcock 2014, 2016), by adopting a broader approach, involving 15 different community groups. Due to the limited availability of existing research on how CE projects enact governance, this approach furthered an understanding of which practices or experiences were commonly experienced or unique to a single case. This approach also has limitations, particularly around how representative the views of a single interviewee are. I have sought to mitigate this by carrying out three in-depth case studies. This highlighted the issue of internal exclusion, which can often be subtler in nature and will not be universally experienced or recognised (Young 2000). Further extensive in-depth qualitative research, in particular participant observation, could offer additional insights on this matter.

Beyond Scotland and beyond energy – the wider applicability of these findings

CE is now an internationally recognised concept (REN21 2016), and the language of ED is also gaining ground in numerous countries, especially

Germany (Weis *et al.* 2015, Angel 2016). While Scotland is not a frontrunner in the CE or ED movements, it can be considered part of the next wave: there have been government support mechanisms for CE for over 15 years, and recent government discourse has incorporated the notion of ED. My findings thus offer insights into how the concept of ED spreads and translates into new national contexts and highlight the role of specific geographic and material contexts on how ED is enacted.

For example, unlike in most countries, where energy cooperatives are the dominant form of CE (Haggett and Quiroz-Aitken 2015), the majority of CE groups in Scotland do not distribute income from their energy development to individual group members but use their income solely to fund community development projects. CE groups therefore experience challenges and disagreement not only regarding the development of their energy project but also regarding the governance of subsequent income streams, an issue that gets to the heart of whose vision(s) for the future of a community prevails (van Veelen and Haggett 2017). It is therefore during this post-installation phase that some community groups began to address the issue of diversity, to ensure that the income from the energy project is managed in a way that is representative of the needs and wants of the community. Thus, while Angel (2016) and Grossmann and Creamer (2017) have also highlighted a lack of diversity and inclusivity in community initiatives in other European contexts, this research shows that the nature of Scottish projects means these are perhaps more likely to become points of contention.

This finding is interesting in light of previous research that considers the question of who is part of the 'democratic public' (Walker 2009, Marres and Lezaun 2011, Simcock 2014). It highlights that the question 'who is affected?' not only has a geographical dimension (Simcock 2014, 2016) but also a material one. Here, ideas of inclusivity and the notion of who should be included in decision-making changed after the energy technology was installed. Rather than being characterised by its *technological* dimensions, it is now characterised by its *socio-economic* ones instead. This finding thus resonates with Chilvers and Longhurst (2016) argument that participation is 'both shaped by and actively construct[s] human subjectivities, objects of concern, and models of participation' (p.590). The complexity of the material dimensions of CE may play a particularly important role in shaping participation during the development phase. For example, I showed it to pose specific accountability challenges, with voluntary board members reportedly lacking the necessary skills (and time to acquire them) to oversee every aspect of a project. The nature of the Scottish CE sector – with many groups located in small, rural communities – also contributes to this problem. Further research into different national contexts with different models of CE, and the impact of the material dimension on participation in decision-making, including different understandings of 'who is affected' in

relation to negative impacts (visual, noise) versus positive impacts (financial gain), could provide valuable further insights.

Finally, this research asks ‘what is democracy, to whom?’ I show that community governance practices are based on both local and extra-local considerations. The importance of local contexts was particularly noticeable in relation to inclusivity, with several groups seeking to enhance inclusivity and diversity in their decision-making bodies in different ways. Others adopted a more ‘passively inclusive’ approach but may risk (inadvertently) reproducing pre-existing power relations by relying on ‘local leaders’ to take projects forward (Young 2000, Simcock 2016, Grossmann and Creamer 2017). At the same time, external factors and actors also shape internal CE governance. While this is not unique to CE (see e.g. Creamer 2015), there is some evidence that suggests that this is exacerbated by the extensive interactions between CE groups and other actors. This research shows that the importance of meeting externally set deadlines (for example due to changes in funding) can have unintended consequences for governance practices. Additionally, other research has shown that intermediary organisations have played a particularly important role in developing CE across the United Kingdom, including in shaping community governance (Hargreaves *et al.* 2013, Parag *et al.* 2013, Parag and Janda 2014). Not only do intermediaries offer governance ‘health checks’ or mediation but sometimes also prescribe the parameters for participation. This raises both practical and normative questions: how are different meanings and practices of democratic governance translated through these governance networks and whose meanings prevail? Is, or should, democracy be perceived as a set of locally situated practices or universal principles? The emergence of ED in different national contexts and involvement of different actors at different ‘levels’ of government thus raises the question of how to reconcile potentially different visions of democracy. This research should therefore constitute one necessary step towards an emerging evidence base seeking to understand the complex dynamics of ED.

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